

Secret services

Our undercover investigation of garage servicing reveals major concerns, with only two cars from 50 coming back with a totally clean bill of health

You know it's going to cost you, and it may feel like money for nothing – but the car's service schedule says it's that time again. So, unpleasant as it might be, you duly book the car in, hand over your keys to the garage, cross your fingers and hope for the best.

But without checking every item yourself, how can you be sure the garage has done the necessary? The answer is you can't. It's a lottery whether you get competence and honesty or a mixture of ineptitude and deceit, according to our latest undercover investigation – just take a look at what they missed on our doctored cars (see chart, opposite). There are still too few regulations to make garages toe the line.

Main dealer or independent?

UK owners spend more than £21bn a year maintaining their cars. We reckon this money should go to reliable, honest businesses with sound quality service procedures, not gambled on rogue traders or sharp practices.

In the past, carmakers imposed conditions that their new cars must be serviced by a franchised (main) dealer to protect the warranty. But this is no longer allowed. The revised EC Cars Block Exemption Regulation came into force in 2003, outlawing this practice and enabling independent garages to compete on a more equal footing. It included a requirement for manufacturers to make servicing procedures and parts available to independent garages, as well as to their own dealers.

So, theoretically, the car servicing industry should be more competitive than ever. But a recent Office of Fair Trading (OFT) study concluded that, by and large, con-

sumers still believe they must go to a franchised dealer or risk invalidating their warranty. The truth is that carmakers can specify that you must get the car serviced to a standard in line with their recommendations, but this can be done by any suitably qualified service provider.

We'd love to say 'choose a garage that's working to sound quality standards'. And the OFT would like to do that, too, but that would require garages to be approved to recognised standards. The OFT scheme to approve codes of practice which meet acceptable criteria offers this chance. However, at the time of our undercover research, not one of the trade bodies that might oversee a car servicing code of practice had achieved OFT approval – although this has since changed (see 'A glimmer of hope from Bosch', p15).

Sadly, this means that personal recommendation is still the best available guide as to where to take your car for servicing.

Our investigation

To put the industry to the test, we took 50 cars, all still within their new-car warranty, to garages around the country, roughly

REVERSING LIGHT

We deliberately blew one of the reversing light bulbs

Fault missed:

Independent	8 out of 20
Franchised	11 out of 19
Related franchise	6 out of 11
Total	25 out of 50

NEARSIDE REAR TYRE

We reduced the nearside rear tyre pressure to 20 per cent below the manufacturer's recommended pressure

Fault missed:

Independent	5 out of 20
Franchised	4 out of 19
Related franchise	0 out of 11
Total	9 out of 50

It's a lottery whether you get honest, competent servicing or ineptitude and deceit

evenly spread across the north, south and the Midlands. Twenty went to independent garages, 19 to franchised garages and 11 to 'related' franchises (those of manufacturers owned by the same company as the main franchise – for example, we took Jaguars to Ford and VWs to Skoda).

The real owners of the cars booked their cars in, exactly like normal customers. But before each service, we inspected the cars for any pre-existing conditions the garage should spot. We also introduced four simple faults, and pre-filled the screenwash, to test whether mechanics were on the ball. The faults we picked reflect typical problems that would at least need reporting but which may also lead a competent mechanic to look for a cause. For example, low tyre pressures may mean there's a puncture, while low brake fluid can be an indication of either worn brakes or a leaky braking system. Checking such things should be a normal, and vital, part of any service.

We reinspected each car after it had been serviced. We rated each garage based on whether the service had been carried out in accordance with the manufacturer's schedule, whether the garage spotted the faults we'd introduced and whether it had returned the car in a safe condition. Finally, we checked whether unnecessary work had been recommended or undertaken.

Prices compared

Prices varied widely but franchised dealers consistently charged the most. These were the average servicing prices in our study

Franchised dealers	£255
Related franchises	£218 (14% cheaper)
Independents	£166 (35% cheaper)

SPARE TYRE

We reduced the pressure of the spare tyre to a lowly 10psi

Fault missed:

Independent 18 out of 20

Franchised 15 out of 19

Related franchise 5 out of 11

Total 38 out of 50

SCREEN WASH

We filled up the screen wash just before taking the car in to see how many garages charged for it, even though it was already full

Item charged for:

Independent 4 out of 20

Franchised 9 out of 19

Related franchise 7 out of 11

Total 20 out of 50

BRAKE FLUID

We reduced the level of brake fluid in the reservoir to minimum

Fault missed:

Independent 7 out of 20

Franchised 14 out of 19

Related franchise 5 out of 11

Total 26 out of 50

What the garages missed

No fewer than 46 garages (92 per cent) missed at least one fault, and two, Central Garage (Raunds) Ltd, High Street, Raunds, and Motormaster in Leatherhead, missed all five. Only two achieved top marks from our inspectors for both spotting all the faults and for their overall servicing standards: Highams Park Motor Company, an independent garage in London, and Colliers Jaguar in Tamworth, Staffordshire.

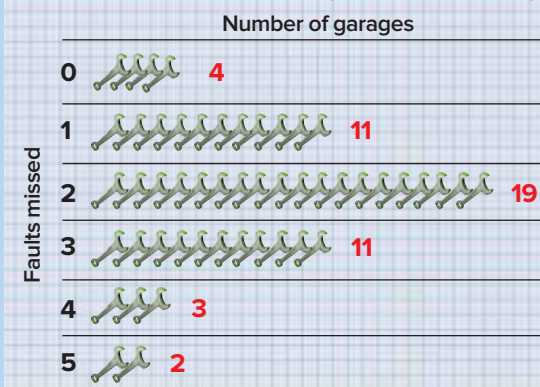
More than three in four garages failed to adjust the spare tyre pressure. And nine failed to adjust the other tyre pressures properly – all indicating a general lack of care for even the basics of servicing. Tyres are often neglected by owners. We found

pre-existing damage, excessive or uneven wear or incorrect pressures on 27 cars in our pre-inspections. So it's all the more critical that a mechanic inspects the tyres thoroughly at the service. A premature tyre failure could be not just inconvenient – it could be life-threatening.

Unbelievably, 26 garages missed the low brake-fluid level. Even a half-competent mechanic should notice this. We wouldn't expect them to top it up without investigating why it's dropped to the minimum level, but a good mechanic will try to diagnose why it's low. Potential problems to look for include worn brakes (fitting new linings should recover the original level), or a system leak – both should have been reported.

MISSED FAULTS

The number of garages that missed up to five of our 'planted' faults during routine servicing



Motormaster, Leatherhead: this independent garage missed all five faults when we sent a doctored car in

Half the garages failed to spot the blown bulb in the reversing light. It's perhaps not as safety-critical as other faults but it certainly indicates a slapdash approach to checking the basics. Ensuring all the lights work is an easy start-point for any service.

Thankfully, few garages carried out significant needless work, but 20 garages still charged for windscreen-washer fluid, even though we'd topped it up just before taking the cars in. Some, though not all, placed the bottle of fluid in the car for future use.

Where's best for servicing

Our findings show that it makes little difference which type of garage you go to for servicing – the standard of work will likely be far from convincing. The average inspection rating for all the garages was a poor

WHERE WE WENT

We took cars from each of the brands below for servicing at franchised and independent garages. For some, we also went to 'related' franchised dealers (that is, a dealer selling cars made by the same parent company, such as taking an Audi to a Skoda garage) as we suspected they may be cheaper.



(also taken to Skoda and VW)



(also taken to Ford)



(also taken to Ford)



(also taken to Skoda)



'I'm disappointed they missed a safety-critical item like this'



WAGON'S WHEELS LEFT ILLEGAL

Noël Sharpe 39, *assistant director for a housing association*

Noël Sharpe took her Volvo V50 estate into Kempster-Ford of Heywood, Lancashire, for its three-year/36,000-mile service. Beforehand, our inspector had noted that the front tyres were worn below the legal limit on the inner edges.

When she first collected the car, Noël thought the garage hadn't done a bad job. It cost around £100 less than the Volvo garage she'd previously used, so she drove off feeling pretty pleased. Then she noticed a grinding noise from the brakes and went straight back. The garage found that a back-plate on the brakes had been misaligned during the service, so it was quickly sorted and Noël was on her way.

But our post-service inspection revealed the garage hadn't spotted the two worn front tyres. She said:

'It's quite difficult to see the inner edges without turning the wheel to full lock, but for something so safety-critical there should have been a more thorough inspection.'

The garage had even filled in its own 'health check' form, which prompts the mechanic to check the tread depth in three positions across each tyre, providing red, amber and green tick-boxes to indicate the seriousness. Only the middle of the tread had been measured, and a tick placed in the green box.

The garage should have advised of the safety risk and proposed the suspension geometry be checked and the tyres replaced.

Miss Sharp said: 'I'm disappointed the garage missed a safety-critical item like this. It should surely be a fundamental part of the service.'



Central Garage, Raunds, Northamptonshire: also missed all five faults on our visit. This is totally unacceptable

2.28 out of 5, with no significant difference between standards at franchised and independent garages. We reckon that means the whole industry isn't up to scratch.

The garages we visited in the Midlands turned in a marginally better performance than the others, with an average rating of 2.53 compared with the south (2.26) and the north (2.06). But there's no obvious reason for this minor difference – it just illustrates the lottery of choosing a garage.

We checked with each garage whether it belonged to a trade body and whether it followed a recognised code of practice. Most (38) garages told us they didn't belong to any body, or they didn't know whether they did. And only 12 claimed to be working to a specific code of conduct. Two of these cited local trading standards schemes, which we think should carry some credibility – but remember, that's just two out of 50. Some of the others cited trade-body codes but unless these meet the OFT's rules about monitoring, they're very hard to police.

Is the industry good enough?

In a word, no. Our study shows a generally lax approach to servicing, unacceptable basic errors or omissions and cases of plain ineptitude across the industry.

There's no discernible difference in standards between franchised garages and



'Consumers are being poorly served by the garage sector'

NIGEL WONNACOTT, SMMT

Contacts

Bosch www.boschcarservice.co.uk
National Consumer Council (NCC)
 0207 7303469; www.ncc.gov.uk

Office of Fair Trading (OFT)
 0845 4722 4499; www.oft.gov.uk

Society of Motor Manufacturers & Traders 0870 751 8270
www.smmt.co.uk

Trading Standards
www.tradingstandards.gov.uk

independents, although independents are considerably cheaper and often more conveniently located.

Few of the garages we looked at belonged to trade bodies or followed formal codes of practice. The lack of regulation shows in the poor standards we found.

Nigel Wonnacott of the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders (SMMT) agrees things aren't good enough: 'Consumers are being poorly served by the garage sector,' he told us. 'Your survey is very timely. Garages need to be encouraged to improve their service to the public.'

The SMMT is working with industry partners to gain approval for a new code of conduct. The Motor Industry Service and Repair Code is being developed as a direct response to concerns raised by the National Consumer Council (NCC). This follows the NCC's threat to bring the industry to book by submitting a supercomplaint to the OFT next month.

Nigel Wonnacott told us that around 6,000 outlets were interested in signing up to the code but couldn't say when the scheme would get full OFT approval, which may be sought at the end of the year or even later. Every garage that signs up will be subject to a 'compliance visit' once every two years. If formal complaints are received, this period is shortened.

We asked the NCC for its view on our results and the progress of the SMMT-led code. Steve Brooker, Senior Policy Advocate at NCC, told us: 'It doesn't surprise me that problems still remain. While progress to achieve an OFT-approved code of practice has been slower than we would have hoped, the sector is now close to achieving this.'

If the code succeeds in making a real difference to consumers, it will have been worth the wait.' He estimates it will take around a year of the scheme being monitored in practice before it can gain full OFT approval.

A glimmer of hope from Bosch

You may not associate Bosch with cars but the company produces many car parts and also has a network of around 400 Bosch Car Service garages, spread across the UK. These are independents that operate to Bosch's code of practice.

In July, Bosch was granted OFT approval for its code – the first of its kind. Howard Price, Bosch's Technical Service Manager, told us: 'Every garage is audited once a year, covering 130 check points and discussing any complaints.' He went on: 'We also mystery shop 10 per cent of the network each year, using prepared cars needing a service and with a number of known and introduced faults.' The company's audit procedures for garages seem thorough – we want to see more schemes of this sort.

However, our undercover work revealed that one of the garages to have missed all our faults – Motormaster of Leatherhead – was a Bosch Car Service centre. When we put this to Howard Price he was very disappointed and said it was 'unacceptable'.

Mr Price promised that this garage would have a site audit within four weeks and a full mystery shop within three months – and that he would share the results with us. He pointed out that this is just one garage and that the major benefit of the code is that it demands effective action to be taken swiftly to address consumer complaints. We sincerely hope it can live up to its promises.



'We mystery shop 10 per cent of the network each year'

HOWARD PRICE,
BOSCH CAR SERVICE

Checklist

It really pays to know your stuff when booking a service. Shop around, too

■ **Prepare notes** Write down your car's model, age, mileage, engine size, fuel type and registration number. Check the owners' handbook for which service you require (for example, 12,000-mile or one-year service) and the main tasks included.

What needs changing (such as engine oil, oil filter, spark plugs, air filter), and what needs checking (such as brakes, tyres, lights, suspension, and so on)?

■ **Shortlist garages** It's hard to tell good garages from bad. Ideally, choose one that follows a code of conduct. OFT-approved schemes should be best but, at present, these are rare. The next best endorsement is from local trading standards offices. Personal recommendation is an invaluable pointer, so ask around. Draw up a shortlist of the garages you favour.

■ **Get quotes** Call each one, noting down who you've spoken to and the price for your service.

■ **Check their standards** Ask whether the garage will carry out the service in line with the manufacturer's procedures, using original parts or those of 'equivalent quality'.

■ **Check what the quote includes** Make sure it includes all parts, labour and VAT.

■ **Keep the book stamped** Ask whether the garage will stamp the service book and, if your car has a service warning light or reminder, whether it will reset this after servicing.

■ **Timing** Check when it can fit you in and how long it will take.

■ **Don't be hasty** Write down all the information and say you'll call back. Don't rush to book your car in straightaway – by ringing round a few garages and playing them off against each other, you can save a lot of cash.

Legal Service

which?

Know your rights
If you've had problems with your franchised dealer or local garage, Which? Legal Service can provide advice to resolve disputes swiftly. We are currently offering new members to the service a six-month subscription for the price of three months – £9.75. Visit www.whichlegalservice.co.uk or call 0800 252100.

WHICH? SAYS

It's time unsafe garages were hung out to dry

Our study has found little to show that garage servicing is improving. Getting your car serviced is still a hit-and-miss affair and we can really only advise you to choose a garage on a friend's recommendation.

There's a glimmer of hope from Bosch, with the only OFT-approved code of practice in the industry, but it governs only a few

hundred garages.

The SMMT says the industry is taking steps to self-regulate. But it will be more than a year before we see signs of progress, if the OFT approves the industry's code. Based on predicted take-up, this still leaves most of the UK's 26,000 garages with little regulation.

Wider action is needed to sort out the rogues.